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Soviet spy case angers many Russian émigrés living in America

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When the news broke last week that two Soviet émigrés had been arrested in Los Angeles for alleged espionage against the United States, Helen Ostashevsky of Brooklyn was outraged.

What they did was terrible, regardless of their nationality, she said. But "because they gave up their Soviet citizenship and accepted all the benefits of American life, and then betrayed it," their crime was even more terrible.

"And, of course, we're very worried that the American public will now be suspicious of the émigré population in general."

The reaction of Mrs. Ostashevsky, a Leningrad native who emigrated five years ago, is typical of other Soviet Jews who have settled here — many after having waited several months or years for an exit visa.

Acknowledging that they had no evidence to support their feelings, all émigrés interviewed in New York over the weekend were quite certain that Svetlana and Nikolai Ogorodnikov, the accused spies arrested Oct. 2 in Los Angeles along with FBI agent Richard Miller, were planted in this country by the KGB (the Soviet secret police).

"They [the KGB] would have been complete idiots if they *hadn't* used the big emigration for their purposes," said one Manhattan émigré, referring to the decade ending in 1981 which saw some 250,000 Soviets (mostly Jewish) come to this country. The Ogorodnikovs arrived in 1983. "The arrests were not surprising. What did surprise me was that the US government wasn't more careful about letting such people in in the first place."

Many émigrés contacted in New York City said they think KGB informers have infiltrated much of the émigré community

around the world.

"It is possible that every anticommunist organization in this country has an informer," said Andrei Sedykh, editor of the New York-based Russian-language newspaper Novoe Russkoye Slovo, who came to the US in 1943.

One aspect of the Los Angeles case that puzzled some émigrés was the activities of the Ogorodnikovs themselves, who had a reputation for being openly pro-Soviet. Mrs. Ogorodnikov sold Soviet magazines and showed Soviet films. Such activity, émigrés said, would certainly not have given the Ogorodnikovs the low profile they would need to conduct espionage. Perhaps the Soviet government, some Russians suggested, wanted these people to be caught spying so the émigré community would be discredited in the eyes of the American public.

Many émigrés do seem genuinely concerned about the image of their community. They say they felt anger and bitterness from some Americans last year after the Soviets shot down the Korean airliner. But it is cases like the murder last year of Tania Zelensky in

Pittsfield, Vt., that make many émigrés shudder. The woman, who wasn't even herself an émigrée but born here to Russian parents, was shot by a man who reportedly thought she was conducting espionage activities in her convenience store.

The news about the Ogorodnikov spy case has been especially hard on older immigrants, who remember the Stalin era.

"They lived through awful years in the Soviet Union," said one émigré, whose elderly mother also lives in the US. "They know what kind of harm can come from a national obsession. They exaggerate everything now. They worry that there may be a witch hunt for Soviet spies" in the US.

Not all émigrés interviewed, however, were upset about the arrest of the

Ogorodnikovs. Volodya, an artist whose cramped, gray apartment in Far Rockaway, Queens, looks a lot like what he left behind in Moscow three years ago, shrugged off the news. He is more upset by the Russians who, he says, come to the US just to make money.

"Some take on the worst practices of this country — prostitution, counterfeiting, smuggling," says Volodya. The FBI acknowledges that a few years ago the beginnings of a "Russian mafia" emerged in this country, centered in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach area, which is heavily populated by working-class Soviet immigrants.

But newspaper editor Sedykh maintains that despite the appearance of the organized crime network, the vast majority of émigrés are hardworking, law-abiding people. And because many Soviet Jews had waited so long for their exit visas, they tend to value their freedom all the more. This is especially so since the Soviet government slowed emigration to a trickle.

"The Russians who came here hate the Soviet regime . . . because of its anti-Semitism," Mr. Sedykh explained. "They want to become Americans and be decent people in this country. Then they discover a few rotten apples among them."